

CIA numbers game

Even in these days of disillusionment with government and general public bafflement over Washington's foreign adventures, it may be difficult to swallow some of the proliferating "exposes" of CIA assassination plots, subversions of foreign governments and various other double-aught-seven misadventures.

It is not at all hard to accept, however, a story of CIA bureaucratic snafu, cover-up, incompetence and knuckling-under that appears in the May issue of Harper's Magazine under the byline of Sam Adams, a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst.

Anyone reluctant to have his faith in the CIA as an independent, courageous and competent arm of the government severely shaken had better not read Adams' account of his frustrating eight-year fight to get the CIA, the military and the White House to take an honest look at the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

ADAMS' STORY is easy to accept because it fits all too snugly into the familiar patterns of government operations which subordinate truth to sometimes base, sometimes merely self-deluding "policy." Generals and politicians share a trait: facts are not to be allowed to get in the way of preconceptions or agreed-upon lies.

Adams was, late in 1965, assigned to study the Viet Cong. Though the American forces in Vietnam already numbered about 200,000, Adams was the only fulltime CIA operative in Washington thus employed, and he was still the only one until 1968. That in itself is strange enough, but Adams' account of his work and the CIA's and the military's consistent and usually successful attempts to ignore or bury it are in the realm of the incredible.

Through the study of captured Viet Cong documents, Adams discovered that the official assessments of Viet Cong strength — the figures on which the whole military strategy was supposed to rest — were gross underestimates. The military kept saying the Viet Cong were running out of men (remember?). Adams couldn't understand how a force which was supposed to number no more than 270,000 could, every year, lose 50,000 to 100,000 men through desertion and another 150,000 through death, wounds and capture, and still remain an effective fighting force. His study convinced him that the Viet Cong had more like 600,000 men. The story of his subsequent "battle of the numbers" with his CIA superiors and the military is infuriating reading.

on long-outdated data supplied by Saigon. Astonishingly, the numbers for the guerrilla militia, service troops and political cadres remained exactly the same year after year, down to the last digit! In other words, no one even bothered to update them or even, for that matter, to look at them.

Adams soon realized, in confrontations with his CIA superiors and with the military chiefs in Saigon, that there was method in this apparent madness. That 270,000 was a magic figure, a policy figure with a kind of life of its own. For their own purposes, the generals would not tolerate any estimates of Viet Cong strength that went above 300,000.

The American public was being told there was a light at the end of the tunnel, and no such light existed. To accept realistic figures would have compelled a decision: get out or send in a lot more troops. Then came the 1968 Tet offensive, which finally jarred the White House into accepting the 600,000 figure, but by that time "10,000 American soldiers had been killed . . . because the generals had played politics with the numbers."

ADAMS' STUBBORN FIGHT to get the truth out got him, instead, restricted. He was barred from high-level CIA deliberations and declared persona non grata at military installations. He and a young associate turned to a study of the Viet Cong spy network. They made more astounding discoveries. Again a phony numbers game was being played, this time more out of sheer ignorance than complicity. Adams and his colleague found hard evidence that the Americans had underestimated the number of spies and undercover agents by several thousand per cent. He even discovered that the CIA's own operations in some areas of Vietnam were being conducted by Viet Cong agents!

Again, Adams was frustrated in trying to get his reports out. Finally he was transferred and assigned to studying the Khmer Rouge insurgents in Cambodia — and he came up with more startling statistics showing rebel strength had been enormously underestimated. When he ran up against another stone wall at the CIA, he resigned.

Adams account contains a final irony. When Daniel Ellsberg was on trial for releasing the Vietnam files, one of the charges was that he had endangered national security by revealing figures on enemy strength. And what were those figures? Why, the same old faked numbers from back in '67. "Imagine!" says Adams. "Hanging a man for leaking faked numbers."

It can be believed. It can be believed.

Adams

ponent numbers that went into that figure of 270,000 Viet Cong were either pulled out of thin air or based